ABSTRACT

                This paper discusses non-native speakers' use of
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problems in conversational listening. It is concerned with the
question of whether these interactional listening strategies can be
taught as a means to improve learners' conversational ability rather
than allowing them simply to develop as a result of practice. This
paper is a preliminary report on a practical experiment designed to
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(Contains 39 references.) (Author)

Interactional Listening Tasks: A Comparative Study of
Strategy and Practice Teaching Approches

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Abstract

This paper discusses non-native speakers' use of interactional strategies to elicit responses from or negotiate meaning with their interlocutors in an attempt to solve their problems in conversational listening. It is concerned with the question of whether these interactional listening strategies can be taught as a means to improve learners' conversational ability, rather than allowing them simply to develop as a result of practice. The paper is a preliminary report on a practical experiment designed to investigate the effect of strategy and practice teaching in communicative activities in order to find out the applicability and effectiveness of listening strategy training in the L2 classroom.

1. Introduction

Meaning negotiation is an indispensable feature of conversational discourse. Much research (e.g. Ferguson 1975, Arthur, Weiner, Culver, Lee and Thomas 1980, Long and Sato 1983, Gass and Varonis 1985) has been conducted into the negotiation of meaning by means of linguistic and conversational adjustments adopted by native speakers (NSs) with nonnative speakers (NNSs). According to Pica, Holliday, Lewis and Morgenthaler (1989), the term 'negotiation' in second language studies refers to exchanges between NNSs and their interlocutors as they try to prevent their communications from breaking down and, at the same time, to arrive at mutual comprehension. Varonis and Gass (1985) suggest that negotiation, especially in NNS-NNS discourse, serves the purpose of negotiating for non-understanding or for the continuation of the conversation. In their study, a greater number of meaning negotiations are found in NNS-NNS discourse than in NS-NNS or NS-NS discourse. They argue that the reasons are perhaps the learners' recognition of 'shared incompetence' and their different cultural or educational backgrounds. For conversational participants to reach mutual comprehension, meaning negotiations must lead to comprehensible input which, according to Krashen (1985), plays a crucial role in the process of SLA.

Recent research (Long 1983, Varonis and Gass 1985, Pica 1987, Pica, Young and Doughty 1987) has suggested that modifications made by both NSs and NNSs to the interactional structure of conversations through means such as clarification requests, confirmation and comprehension checks may increase the possibilities of mutual intelligibility which can best assist the second language comprehension of a NNS and thus, may promote acquisition. Long (1983) shows that of the two types of meaning negotiation, modifications made to the interactional structure of a conversation are more extensive and more consistent in NS-NNS discourse than those made to linguistic input. He further argues that this kind of modification is of more importance than input modification in bringing about comprehensible input, a prerequisite for acquisition. In fact, as Gaies (1982) points out, both types of modifications may help to reduce the

cognitive processing and conversational burdens on the NNS and thus may leave more room for the learners to take in the input and try to comprehend it.

2. Interactional listening strategies

In conversation, especially in the case of an L2 learner trying to communicate with a NS, difficulties may be encountered in getting the message across and this is when communication strategies (CSs) may come into the picture. Tarone (1980) defines CSs from an interactional aspect. She states that under such circumstances, CSs are used by the speaker to try to obtain agreement with a listener on some negotiated meaning; it is not until some response has been given by the listener and the speaker realises that his communicative goal is achieved that he can stop trying to employ further alternative specific CSs. This is, thus, based on the speaker's perception of whether or not the meaning is shared with the listener; if not, it will be necessary for the speaker to resort to CSs. We can see that there is a mutual attempt to negotiate meaning; the speaker will use productive communication strategies to try to get the listener to share his meaning and the listener may resort to interactional listening strategies to signal to the speaker whether the meaning is shared. In normal interactional conversation, productive and listening strategies are inseparable if effective communication is to take place.

Following Tarone's definition of CSs, Faerch (1981) describes recepti.e communication strategies as cognitive plans which are employed to solve comprehension problems (conscious to interlocutors) in situations where the communicative resources of linguistic and procedural knowledge are inadequate. He further classifies these strategies into : (1) psycholinguistic strategies, which involve cognitive solutions, and (2) behavioural strategies, which involve communicative behaviour.

Psycholinguistic, or internal, strategies involve all attemp's to infer meaning - they could be knowledge-driven or top-down, data-driven or bottom-up processing and inferencing procedures. On the other hand, behavioural strategies are interactional/non-interactional receptive CSs. A non-interactional strategy is usually employed in the interest of face-saving, i.e. when the listener does not want to admit to the speaker that he is having a communication problem. An example of this type of strategy is 'avoidance'. However, when a language learner is less coy about requesting assistance from his interlocutor, he adopts interactional strategies, in which production is involved, for self-repair. Two types of requests for self-repair can be classified :

1.   General requests - followed by a specific repair in some cases.

2.   Specific requests.

There is a third strategy : claiming ignorance. For example, 'I don't know' serves two functions : (1) constituting a minimal reply without initiating a repair-sequence; (2) concealing a comprehension or production problem. In classroom situations, the third strategy seems to be quite popular with perhaps more passive or less motivated learners. Faerch (1981) claims that it is a highly useful strategy. However, this strategy may be regarded as a form of 'avoidance' since the learner does not even try to solve his communication problem by negotiating with his interlocutor.

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3. Teaching strategic competence

In their seminal paper, Canale and Swain (1980) divide communicative competence into grammatical, sociolinguistic and strategic elements. Strategic competence (SC) is made up of CSs with both verbal and nonverbal aspects. Although there is an increasing welcome for the 'communicative approach' to the teaching of second and foreign languages in most parts of the world, the training of SC has been neglected, especially in overcrowded classroom situations. Tarone and Yule (1989) find that there are very few teaching materiais available at the moment which can help language learners to develop the ability to employ appropriate CSs when problems arise in the process of transmitting information. They suggest that a language teacher should provide the learners with actual instruction in using the strategies and to give them opportunities to practise strategy use. However, in those materials that do attempt to teach SC, learners are often instructed to use certain strategies without being informed as to why such strategies are employed or what their significance is in certain communicative situations. Wenden (1986) calls this kind of strategy training approach 'blind training', since the approach emphasizes learning 'something' rather than on learning to learn. For example, note-taking in some listening activities is so geared towards a particular exercise that it fails to provide learners with opportunities to realise the fact that this is a strategy which they can utilize on their own in other contexts. Brown, Bransford, Ferrara and Campione (1983) showed that although blind training often results in improved performance of the task to which it is oriented, learners do not show signs of using the trained strategy after training. Their problem, according to Wenden (1986), is that they cannot identify similar communicative situations in which it can be employed.

Nonetheless, there is now some evidence that SC can be fostered in classroom by providing activities that promote the use of CSs in order to help learners in performing communicative acts successfully. Such classroom activities, as Dornyei and Thurrell (1991) point out, provide language learners with a sense of security in their target language so they can feel more confident in handling difficulties. Moreover, opportunities for the practice of strategy use should also be provided so as to increase learners' ability or select appropriate CSs when there are problems or breakdowns in the communication process. In situations where learners can practise with native speakers of the target language, for example, if the learner is in the country where the target language is spoken, the classroom activities can serve as a supportive or back-up practice. However, in situations where few language teachers are native speakers of the target language and opportunities to practise with native speakers are scarce, a more focussed and explicit approach is necessary (Tarone and Yule 1989). In other words, CSs must be taught on the basis of explicitness of purpose. Wenden (1986) terms training of this kind 'informed training'; learners under this 'informed training' approach should be instructed in the need for certain strategies and their anticipated effects.

Research into the teachability of SC is still limited. However, O'Malley, Chamot and Walker (1987) conclude that there are a number of strategies in language learning which can be embedded into existing teaching curricula. They can further be taught with a bit of extra effort so as to improve the overall class performance. Dornyei and Thurrell (1991) believe that strategy training in language learning not only facilitates spontaneous improvization skills but also linguistic creativity. Paribakht (1985) states that strategic competence seems to develop in a learner's L1 with the individual's increasing language experience and is found to be transferrable to L2 learning situations. Her study suggests that speakers' strategic competence and their proficiency level in the target language

appear to be independent. If this is the case, as Dornyei and Thurrell (1991) point out. it is quite possible to develop strategic competence in language learners since it does not appear to be dependent on other elements that contribute to language proficiency.

Moreover, from the viewpoint of SC, language teachers should help learners to increase their metacommunicative awareness, so that learners know in advance what types of strategies are most suitable for specific communication situations (Faerch and Kasper 1986). Oxford (1989) points out that, apart from metacognitive awareness, there are many factors which can influence one's strategy choice and use. These factors include the language being learned, duration/proficiency level, age, sex, affective variables, such as learning attitudes, motivation, learning goals and so on. Besides, personality, national orign, aptitude and language learning style of a language learner can also affect the choice of strategy type and use. For successful training in strategies of learning and communication to take place, all these factors should be taken into consideration.

In many communicative syllabuses, most of the exercises are designed to focus on strategies appropriate for describing physical or concrete entities or concepts, such as 'a knife', steps in making coffee or in assembling a pine wood shelf. In such exercises, learners may use strategies such as paraphrase or gestures to solve the problem. However, they may encounter greater difficulty when trying to convey abstract concepts and entities, such as 'beauty' or to explain more culture-specific entities, such as 'dim sum'. Faerch and Kasper (1986) underline the need for studies of strategies that express more abstract and culture-specific concepts and objects, and may require a different repertoire. In studies conducted by Bongaerts and Poulisse (1989) and Kellerman, Ammerlaan, Bongaerts and Poulisse (1990) in which language learners were asked to describe unconventional abstract shapes, referential CSs were found to be used in the process of description. According to Kellerman et al (1990), a referential strategy involves the selection of specific properties of the referent in order for the speaker to solve his gap in his lexical repertoire and maintain his communicative intent. Such strategies are also called 'compensatory strategies'in the second language literature (e.g. Faerch and Kasper 1983, Poulisse, Bongaerts and Kellerman 1984). Learners are found to make use of not only the perceptual features of the entities but also the other properties, such as functional or locational. Thus, in strategy training, language teachers must see to it that the learners select the minimally distinctive features or properties of the referent in order to bridge the lexical gap in communication. However, this ability may be hindered by the available linguistic resources, the world knowledge of the learner and also his assessment of the linguistic and world knowledge of his listener.

4. Interactional listening strategies : A practical experiment

4.1 Research questions

Most research on strategy training has been done in L1 (e.g. Carrier and Titus 1981, Jones and Hall 1982) and only a few research studies (e.g. O'Malley 1987) have investigated strategy training with ESL students under natural classroom teaching conditions. Further research is therefore necessary in order to look into the feasibility of strategy training, especially in interactional activities, in the L2 classroom. I am

currently conducting a study that is related to the area of listening strategy training. It addresses three questions :

1. whether it is correct to assume that strategies, in fact, result from better listening ability. Thus, it is necessary to discover the source of strategies observed in use, (i.e. whether they originate from the students themselves or from their teachers or materials);

2. whether strategies can be used as a means of or as a short-cut to helping students to improve their listening ability;

3. whether strategy-focussed teaching is more effective than practice-based teaching.

4.2 The study

4.2.1 Subjects

The subjects in the study are either undergraduate or graduate students at the University of Edinburgh, all of whom have taken the University's Test of English at Matriculation (TEAM), comprising sections on vocabulary, listening, reading and essay writing.

4.2.2 Methodology

The study is being conducted in eight stages, as follows :

Stage 1

The subjects were divided into two groups, which were called the Guidance Group (GG) and the Correction Group (CG). The groups were of mixed ability in listening as measured by the TEAM listening sub-test. The teaching focus in the groups would be different: the GG would focus on interactional listening strategies, whereas the CG would receive pronunciation practice. Each group was sub-divided into two classes, making a total of four teaching classes with 13 students on average. It was intended that from each class two pairs of subjects (the Experimental Pairs) would be selected for follow-up work of a qualitative nature, as described under Stages 6 and 8.

Stage 2

The subjects attended a 12-hour training course in conversational speaking using the identical material from *Study Speaking* (Lynch and Anderson 1992). The material selected comprised information tasks which require 'pen and paper' solutions, and scenarios, in which two people have different personal goals and each tries to convince the other.

The training was divided into eight sessions of 90 minutes. To minimize the teacher effect, the four teachers were asked to take turns in teaching each class twice. The teachers were audiotaped, not only to monitor their performance but also find out the proportion of the input to the output of the subjects.

Th: first training session was of particular importance since it helped to raise the subjects' awareness of strategy use or pronunciation problems and to build up their knowledge of these areas. Each class worked on a 'jigsaw speaking' activity, in which

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the teacher gave each person in the group a sentence from a paragraph. Each class member had to memorise their own sentence and the sentences were then collected in. The participants were not allowed to write anything down. Their task was to find out from the others in the group the correct order of the jumbled sentences. The purpose was to familiarise the subjects with the activity type and to make them aware of the kind of communication problems it raises. The activity itself also served as a lead-in to what followed.

After completing the 'jigsaw speaking' task, the students were shown a videotaped performance on the same task by another group of students and were issued with an accompanying worksheet (Appendix A and B). The CG had worksheets on pronunciation problems illustrated by participants in the video, whereas the GG had worksheets on examples of strategy use where comprehension problems arose. They worked on their worksheets when the video was playing. The video was played a second time so the subjects could complete what they had missed in the first playing. The teachers then checked and discussed answers with the subjects.

After the checking of answers, the subjects were given a checklist (see Appendix C and D) according to their Group classification. The checklist contains examples of strategies or pronunciation problems illustrated in the video. The teachers went through and discussed the checklists with the subjects and at the same time, asked for more examples or alternatives.

In sessions 2-7, the subjects were all paired up to do the practice tasks. The teachers went round to each pair, took note of mistakes and then gave feedback to the subjects after each task, oriented towards either strategy use or pronunciation accuracy.

Stage 3

In the final session, the subjects were asked to repeat the TEAM listening sub-test. This was to find out if the subjects' listening ability in general had improved after the training. After the dictation, most of the subjects formed pairs, each of which was asked to go to an adjoining room to do a task in which one partner had to tell the other how to draw a route on a map. Their performance was audiotaped while the teacher went on with the rest of the class to do the practice task.

Stage 4

For logistical reasons, the Experimental Pairs came back the following day to perform the task; their performance was videotaped. Each Experimental Pair was asked to go into a classroom where an OHP and a video camera were set up. The speaker sat behind a screen, whereas the listener sat next to the OHP so he/she could draw the route on a transparency map. The listener's work on the projected map was videotaped. This kind of information task provides opportunities to find out how listeners are required to elicit responses from speakers when information is missing or when communication is at conflict. This procedure was designed to allow subsequent analysis of the listener's doubts and hesitations in the process of completing the task.

Stage 5

After a week, the Experimental Pairs performed a second task. The procedure was identical, and the materials were similar, to Stage 4. When it finished, the listeners in

each pair were asked to come for an interview concerning about their performance of the first two tasks.

Stage 6

A retrospection interview was held after the second task with the 'listener' from each Experimental Pair, conducted in their first language. The interviewee watched the video recordings of their stage 4 and 5 tasks. The subjects also looked back at their transparencies and were allowed to see the videos in their entirety before the interview began. The interviews were divided into two parts with the first part on the subject's perception of the whole training and the second part on the subject's task performance. Questions were based on a questionnaire, completed by the researcher. Questions in the first part of the questionaire dealt with the subject's general problems in learning the target language and their opinion of, or suggestions for, the training. The second half of the questionaire included simple prompt questions such as 'Could you please tell me why you had stopped/hesitated here?' at points in the recording where there was a visible hesitation. Both interviews were audiotaped.

Stage 7

After three months, the Experimental Pairs will perform a final task with identical procedure and similar materials as Stage 4.

Stage 8

A final retrospection interview will be held shortly after Stage 7. The procedure of the interview will be identical to the one mentioned in Stage 6, except that this time only the video recording of the third task will be played and questions based on a questionaire will centre on the subject's task performance and their opinion of the three tasks.

At the time of writing, only the videotaping of the second task has been completed so re·ults and interpretations of the study have yet to be provided.

5. Summary

Available research in both Ll and L2 (e.g. Raugh and Atkinson 1975, O'Malley et al 1987) suggest that strategies in language learning can be both described and also taught. It is hoped that this study can provide empirical evidence on the effect of strategy training in L2 classroom, so teachers will know how to help their students to develop the appropriate strategy for conversational listening.

Moreover, the way in which L2 listeners process and comprehend aural information may provide language teachers with insights into the comprehension processes of a language learner that may assist the selection of material and strategies suitable for classroom practice.

Through strategy training in general, it is also hoped that learners may increase their flexibility in applying the appropriate strategy or strategies. In other words, the ultimate aim of this study is to provide support for such strategy training in language learning, so that learners can take control of their own learning process both inside and outside the classroom environment.

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Guidance Worksheet (extract)

Identify the following communication problems which have taken place in the video that you are going to watch and tick (✓) the appropriate column. Some stretches of text may contain ONE or MORE problem points.

The organisation part : 5 mins.

Note: A and B do not represent the same speakers in each stretch of text.

Stretch of Text	for clarification		for confirmation		for indication of comprehension
	General Request	Specific Request	Approx-imating/ Rephrasing Speaker's Message	Repeating Speaker's Message	
A: ...because I got a sentence, there are so dance and disco in the evening. B: uh?					
A: She, I think, it mean ship. B: ship? A: yeah, I think. She can carry about 2,000 people. C: Okay.					
A: My sentence is Q E.II is the largest, uh, passenger ship in the word. (voices) A: Q.E.II... B: is the largest?					
A: They must be nice to work on her. B: to work? A: on her. C: on her? A: on her.					
A: The largest is... B: The what?					
A: The largest is ten metre eight. B: by eight? Number eight?			✓		

Pronunciation Worksheet

Identify the following pronunciation problems on the video tape that you are going to watch and tick (✓) the appropriate column. Some stretch of text may contain ONE or MORE problem points.

The organisation part : 5 mins.

Stretch of Text	Word Stress	/s/ vs /ʃ/	Dropping of final consonant and plural / 3rd person endings	Dropping of /l/ before consonant	Aspiration of /p/, /t/, /k/ and /d/
- They all have a beautiful cabin to sleep in.					
-...because I got a sentence. There are so dance and disco in the evening.					
-She, uh, can carry about 2,000 people. She, I think, it mean ship					
-My sentence is Q.E. II is the largest, uh, passenger ship in word.					
-It is four times more expensive than					
-They must (murmur) nice ... they must be nice to work on her.					
-There are open to want to participate					
-The largest is ten metre by eight					
-...because I got a sentence. There are so dance and disco in the evening.					

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Appendix C

Guidance Checklist

1.	making general requests (i.e. the problem points are not specified.)	'uh?' 'huh?' 'Sir/Madam?' 'Excuse me?' / 'Pardon (me)?' 'What?' 'What do you mean?' 'I don't know what you mean?' 'Could you please repeat that?' 'Could you please repeat what you have just said?' 'Could you say that again?'
2.	making specific requests (i.e. the problem points are specified.)	'The what?' 'Could you spell X?' (X is a word) 'What does X mean?' / 'What is the meaning of X?' (X can be a word or a phrase) 'Where do I go from here?' 'Do I turn left or right?' 'Could you explain this more clearly to me?'

For Confirmation

1.	approximating / rephrasing the speaker's message	'Do you mean ...?' -They're having a sale in M and S? -Do you mean they will sell things cheaper?
2.	repeating the speaker's message	-on her. -on her? -You turn left. -I turn left?

For Indication of Comprehension

Explicit -	'Okay.' 'Ah! Huh, huh.' 'Yeah, yeah.' 'Yes.' 'I see.' 'Got it.' 'Uhuh.' (These may be accompanied by gestures (e.g. head nodding) which may denote implicit indication of comprehension or the listener may carry on what he has been doing.)

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Appendix D

Pronunciation Checklist

Word Stress	/s/ vs / ∫ /	Final Consonant and Plural/3rd Person Endings	/l/ before Consonant	Aspiration of /p/, /t/, /k/ and /d/
cabin	she ship	times metres eight want	world also	play times dance open work